

EXCERPT FROM THE KORYŎ SA: "INHERITANCE OF SLAVE STATUS"

Introduction

Slavery was an important institution in Koryŏ and Chosŏn society that is still not fully understood by scholars today. Slaves, of course, stood at the very bottom of the social hierarchy; the existence and perpetuation of this status was an aspect of the continuing importance of hereditary status.

Selected Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpt from the Koryŏ sa: "Inheritance of Slave Status"

In the past, our founding ancestor, setting down instructions to posterity on the question of inheritance, stated: "In general, the offspring of the lowest class (*ch'ŏnnyu*) are of a different stock. Be sure not to allow the people of the lowest class to become emancipated. If they are permitted to become free, later they will certainly get government positions and gradually work into important offices, where they will plot rebellions against the state. If this admonition is ignored, the dynasty will be endangered."

Question:

1. What assumptions justified slavery in Koryŏ Korea? What do you think it meant to say that slaves ("the offspring of the lowest class") "are of a different stock"? How does this compare with the intellectual or social justifications for slavery in other contexts?

Longer selection

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Accordingly, the law of our country provides that only if there is no evidence of lowborn status for eight generations in one's official household registration may one receive a position in the government. As a rule, in the lowborn class, if either the father or mother is low, then the offspring is low. Even if the original owner of a lowborn person frees him, allowing him to achieve commoner status, the descendants of that freed individual must return to low status. If the owner has no heirs, the descendants of his freed lowborn belong to his clan. This is because they do not want to allow lowborns to achieve permanent commoner status.

Still there is fear that some may flee and escape their status, becoming commoners. Accordingly, even though we take preventive measures, many take advantage of the situation and become crafty. There is also fear that some, relying on power or merit, will dare to take the law into their own hands and plot rebellion against the state, but eventually they are destroyed. Although we know it is not easy to heed the founder's admonition, we still fear there is no way to check all disloyal feelings.

[Translated by Hugh H.W. Kang and Edward J. Shultz]

Questions:

1. How was slave status passed on?
2. Does the author fear slaves? Why or why not?
3. The author insists that slavery is hereditary, and that freed slaves may never pass on permanent non-slave ("commoner") status to their descendants. From the whole of the document, how much social mobility do you think actually existed in this part of the Koryŏ period? How do you think Koryŏ compared with Silla in this regard? More generally, how might we understand prohibitive statements of this sort as historical evidence?